DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 392 330 HE 028 918

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TITLE Conflict Management in an International Teaching Assistant Training Program.
PUB DATE Nov 95
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the National Conference on the Education and Employment of Graduate Teaching Assistants (5th, Denver, CO, November 8-11, 1995).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Faculty; *Conflict Resolution; Department Heads; *Foreign Students; Higher Education; Program Improvement; Screening Tests; *Teaching Assistants; *Training
IDENTIFIERS *New Mexico State University

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how the management of conflict in an international teaching assistant (ITA) training program can benefit all stakeholders and maintain good will between departments and the ITA program by encompassing strategies for mutual gain. It focuses on how the ITA training program at New Mexico State University has resolved many of the conflicts that arise among students, departments, and the program. The paper examines sources of conflict and various conflict scenarios, as well as possible solutions to these conflicts, such as arrangements for late ITA training programs and screenings for students who are unaware of the requirement and close coordination with department heads and faculty to ensure that they are aware of the school's requirements for ITA training. (MDM)

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The Professional Apprenticeship: TAs in the 21st Century

5th National Conference On the Education and Employment of Graduate Teaching Assistants

November 8 - 11, 1995

Denver, Colorado

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Conflict Management in an International Teaching Assistant Training Program

Conflicts arise when there is serious disagreement or argument about something important. In higher education, which retains high levels of autonomy even within the public domain, conflicts are common. As a unit within the higher education community, the ITA (international teaching assistants) program is no exception. To understand why, consider the nature of the academy and the role which the ITA programs and the administration play.

Academics retain a high degree of autonomy within the workplace and maintain control of their departments' curricula and policies. Department heads and deans are administrators who originate from academic disciplines and so understand the parameters within which academics function. Furthermore, non-administrative academics often have many administrative duties such as supervising graduate assistants, managing undergraduate programs and deciding upon program requirements.

One way of either strengthening or enlarging a graduate program is by offering assistantships to graduate students. The method of allocation of assistantships can vary from institution to institution. Some universities may have a central source under the 'control' of the graduate school. In others, departments secure assistantships from the dean of the college or school. Any constraint which is placed upon the eligible candidates could be interpreted as interference and, therefore, a curtailment of the freedom to determine what is best for the academic department.

In many states, international students who wish to apply for state funds in the form of assistantships must submit to screenings and/or preparatory courses. Such a requirement can reduce the numbers of eligible teaching assistants (TAs), particularly in engineering and science departments which attract many graduate students from abroad (Lambert, 1993). But as required by law, institutions have responded to these mandates by establishing international teaching assistant (ITA) training programs. However, the

implementation of ITA programs not only requires the development of criteria for evaluation of the ITAs but it requires an understanding of the external and internal politics involved. The university politics, in turn, can become a source of conflict within an institution housing graduate programs.

Successful ITA (international teaching assistant) programs function with administrative and faculty support. That support is generally elicited by the ITA trainer/administrator through demonstrated program excellence and the trainer's ability to manage conflict. Yet, if the ITA trainer is given the sole authority to decide upon an ITAs eligibility for employment, that power may be questioned by those most affected by a negative decision i.e., the ITA candidates and academic departments.

This discussion addresses how management of conflict can benefit all the stakeholders and maintain good will between the departments and the ITA program by encompassing strategies for mutual gain.

Views of Conflict

Jeffrey Rubin (1993) describes *conflict resolution* as a state of attitude change which effectively brings an end to the conflict in question, while in contrast, *conflict settlement* is an overt conflict which comes to an end even though underlying issues may not have been settled. Both of these terms reflect behavioral changes, some attitudinal and others procedural. Within a higher education setting, conflict resolution implies that some or all of the parties have managed an attitudinal change towards the problem and thereby resolved it; whereas, conflict settlement indicates that a solution has been imposed by an authority without actual changes in attitudes and so inevitable dissatisfaction with the process often results.

Sources of Conflict

Conflicts arise from a number of sources but the overriding cause is the importance that individuals place upon the disagreement. Within the ITA training sphere at my institution, I have identified three common sources of conflict:

An ITA and the ITA trainer/administrator

A faculty mentor(advisor) and the ITA trainer/administrator

A department head and the ITA trainer/administrator

What follows are some examples of situations (conflict scenarios) that have arisen and some suggestions of possible venues for resolution. A brief description of the screening procedures at New Mexico State University (NMSU) is provided for clarification.

Ideally, international graduate students who wish to be considered for a TAship are informed by the Graduate School via the academic departments of the ITA screenings in April and December. The students are then to sign up for a presentation time and are screened. Students who pass the screening qualify to teach; those who do not must participate in a training program and retest. One month prior to the screening, a memo is sent out to all departments stressing that any student who is thinking about applying for such as assistantship should register for the free screening. Roughly 40 students avail themselves of this procedure annually; however, another 10 to 20 contact the ITA academic coordinator directly or through the department head or faculty advisor seeking screening on an ad hoc or individual basis. It is in these requests for additional screenings or unhappiness with screening results that conflicts emerge.

Conflict Scenarios:

ITA and the ITA academic coordinator

Some ITA candidates state that they did not know about the screening and were not informed by the department of the screening. Blame is then placed upon departmental secretaries or academic advisors for failing to notify the student of university policies. Another common explanation for missing a screening is that the student did not plan to apply for a TAship or had been on a research assistantship for years and, as a result, was ignorant of the process. Finally, many students who transferred, and held assistantships in their previous institutions, assume that the screening is not for them.

In all of these instances, the request is for additional screenings as the graduate students have failed to appear for the announced dates. The ITA academic coordinator is then placed in the position of deciding whether to acquiesce or to refuse. Compliance with the requests leads to more ad hoc screenings and refusal leads to graduate students ineligibility for funding and possible departure.

Faculty mentor(advisor) and the ITA academic coordinator

Faculty advisors often proclaim their confidence in the student's English and do not see why screening is necessary. In other cases, the advisors state that the TAs are teaching a foreign language so English is not necessary to function. In some instances, a TAship is available but the advisors insist that the student will only be marking papers and not be in the classroom.

The conflict that arises in these examples is between the departmental faculty representative and the ITA academic coordinator. The faculty member is asked to accept an external assessment of the graduate student's skills even though the ITA academic coordinator is not an expert in the discipline area. Faculty are busily recruiting graduate students and attracting them with offers of support. That support may not be forthcoming if ITA requirements are not met. Understandably, disgruntlement results as there may be genuine disagreement in the evaluation of the skills required for the particular assistantship appointment.

Department head and the ITA academic coordinator

An obvious source of conflict is between the department head in need of filling TA slots and the requirement that international TAs be certified through either the screening or the course training process. This is particularly true when at the beginning of the term, the department head is faced with a last minute withdrawal of a TA. In such cases, department heads often petition the graduate dean for permission to place an unscreened international student as a replacement.

A department head's need to provide instructors for full sections is paramount. Many departments use TAs in introductory courses as lab assistants and feel that adequate supervision of novice instructors is provided by the departments. In actuality, many lab assistants carry the major weight of instruction as it is to them that many questions regarding lecture and text materials are addressed. Nevertheless, the need to fill instructor slots may cloud the department head's perception of the ITA's ability .

Conflict Management

One simple solution to the request for the ad hoc screenings problem would be to refuse any additional screenings and have departments manage their teaching loads with the present staffing. This leads to some problems on a number of levels. Firstly, there is the question of meeting the needs of both the academic departments and the graduate students. The academic department must fulfill its instructor responsibilities and, in many cases, this is done through the use of teaching assistants to increase student-instructor contact. The graduate student applying for the teaching assistantship needs the financial support and tuition reduction that the position offers. (Personally, I tend to be much more sympathetic towards the graduate students who indeed may not have been informed by the department faculty of the screening requirement because of some bureaucratic failure.)

Another repeated misunderstanding among both faculty and TAs is that a facility with English will necessarily indicate a facility with pedagogical skills. This is blatantly untrue as we have all had professors who, although fluent in the English language, were certainly not versed in pedagogy.

At NMSU, the ITA program has been in place for ten years and there is no wish to make the faculty or the students feel that an adversarial process is necessary to deal with the Graduate School requirements; nevertheless, all parties need to understand the political nature of the exercise and that TAships offered merely on the basis of convenience or easing faculty teaching loads cannot be a justification for circumventing policy. Indeed, no non-native English speaker is exempted from screenings ; therefore, the ITA academic

coordinator continually provides ad hoc screenings so that no accusation of favoritism or policy relaxation is suggested. This is problematic since the ad hoc screenings cannot on short notice include personnel such as paid student subjects normally used for the formal procedure; as a result, those screenings are most unsatisfactory in their design since the atmosphere is not one remotely connected to an actual classroom setting. As a consequence, the ITA academic coordinator is dissatisfied and uncomfortable with the ad hoc process but does not wish to alienate colleagues or graduate students any more than necessary.

A further encumbrance is that the ITA academic coordinator's position has not been allocated as a full-time position; that is, that individual (me) has other responsibilities and is not always available to provide screenings on demand.

Obviously, one consistent solution would be to deny all requests for special consideration and require that graduate students attend either one of the two screenings offered. This would be the simplest and cleanest solution for the ITA academic coordinator; however, the enmity that this would arouse would not be conducive to a collegial atmosphere. Neither would it be in the spirit of a university whose main function is to offer educational opportunities to its students. For graduate students, his would include preparation for the professoriate.

Obstacles to Resolution

There are a number of reasons why conflicts such as the ones described in this paper are difficult. Genuine misinformation may be the culprit. New department heads or staff may not be aware of all of the rules and procedures of the university. The ITA requirement is only one of many details about which academic administrators must be cognizant. The requirement may be interpreted differently by interested parties. The issues may not be clear as department heads, ITA academic coordinators and graduate students will probably have varying agendas. Settlement of the conflict may involve compromises that some (or all) of

the parties are unwilling to make. And lastly, personal or emotive issues might arise as a result of statements made in haste or out of peak (Sander, 1993).

Approaches to Conflict Resolution

An authoritative edict from the graduate dean is certainly one simplistic way of settling conflict; however, in an academic setting this is not an ideal solution. Another method is the memo. For example, a department head might request ITA exemption for his/her academic department using as a justification its unique position in the hiring of teaching assistants. Lastly, a standard approach in conflict resolution is to call a meeting and have all parties discuss issues together. It is at such meetings that negotiation and resolution can take place but the attitudes of those at the table can affect the satisfaction levels of the participants.

Negotiation Styles

Williams (1993) discusses effective negotiating styles but points out that 'effectiveness' is a construct. An individual's perception of effective negotiation may well be colored by the levels of satisfaction i.e. outcome of the negotiation. The person who secures the greatest advantage by surrendering the least may feel triumphant. He argues for the cooperative negotiator with the following characteristics: 1) offers fair and objective statements of the facts; 2) makes only reasonable demands (pertaining to the information); 3) is willing to make concessions and rely on reciprocity; 4) can ignore opponent scare tactics; and 5) has as an underlying premise, the establishment of a cooperative, trusting atmosphere.

Mutual Gain

Strategies for mutual gain can only be established if the parties understand what the issues are and if all can comprehend (and agree upon) 'the big picture'. Outcomes assessment evaluation methodology has required academic departments to state their desired objectives and to evaluate the rate of achievement within those confines. Academic departments functioning within the outcomes assessment parameters should include objectives to be met by the undergraduates and their teaching assistants.

Consistent and rational policies are necessary so that people know what is expected of them. At NMSU, ITA screening is mandatory, yet problems do arise. The perspectives of the stakeholders affected by the ITA requirement (department heads, graduate students, undergraduates, parents, ITA academic coordinator) must be taken into account. However, an overriding stipulation must be agreement as to the mission of the institution and how the academic departments help support that mission. Similarly, the Graduate School is there to support the graduate program by maintaining quality control of assistantship allocations and adherence to admission standards.

Resolution:

Formal late screenings can be arranged so as to cater to international graduate students who were for whatever reason unable to attend. These late screenings could be held in the first week of term by which time department heads would have a fairly firm view of instructor needs. A representative of the department would have to attend the screenings or forfeit the assistantship. This would ensure faculty involvement and reinforcement of the seriousness with which the university pursues quality teaching.

Undisclosed Conflict

The issue of ITA employment, particularly of non-native English speakers, has been partially resolved through screening and training ; however, other underlying issues have not. These include the discriminatory nature of the requirement since American or native English speakers are exempted (Brown et al 1991). This adds substance to the fallacious assumption that if you can talk, you can teach. Another issue is whether universities ostensibly committed to excellence in teaching are earnest if the majority of the instructors are neither screened nor trained. These are additional sources of conflict which need discussion.

Conclusion

Universities which require screening of all potential TAs should have fewer conflicts due to interested parties not knowing about screening dates or confusion over who needs to

be screened. The more common and widespread an event, the more people know about it. Moreover, screening of all TAs would make it clear that the university is serious about undergraduate teaching and that good teaching involves more than just language facility. Until such comprehensive screening becomes standard procedure, however, the ITA coordinator will need to expect conflict to arise over ITA screening and to remain flexible enough to seek resolutions which are in the best interest of the program and the parties involved.

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